

**APOSTLE**  
*of the*  
**LAST DAYS**

THE LIFE, LETTERS AND THEOLOGY OF PAUL





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By C. Marvin Pate

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*Apostle of the Last Days: The Life, Letters and Theology of Paul*

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## Introduction

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**N**ext to Jesus Christ, the apostle Paul is the most important figure in the Christian faith. His life, letters and theology indelibly shaped Christianity for centuries to come. Some of the greatest church leaders have accorded an exalted place to the apostle to the Gentiles: Peter honored him (2 Peter 3:15–16); Augustine appealed to him; Luther adored him; Wesley found assurance in him; Barth thundered forth because of him; and Old and New perspectives toward Paul alike extol him as their own.<sup>1</sup>

Paul was a product of three worlds: Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian. These influences impacted Paul in increasing significance, like concentric circles. At the periphery of Paul's world was the Greco-Roman sphere of influence. Like most travelers in the Roman Empire in the middle of the first century AD, Paul spoke the trade language bequeathed to the masses of his day—koine (common) Greek. Koine Greek evolved from Classical Greek language and dialects of the conquered peoples in the domain of Alexander the Great (ca. 330 BC). Koine Greek was to its day what English is to our day. The influence of Greek culture on Paul is also evident in the way he drew upon ancient Greek philosophical traditions such as Platonism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism, even if by way of refutation. Paul also utilized Greek rhetoric, like the diatribe, the fool's speech, *peristasis* (afflictions) lists, etc. And, of course, the concept of the *polis* (city) and even democracy had a constant bearing on Paul's day to day experiences. Mighty Rome also obviously cast

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<sup>1</sup> We will have more to say about some of these individuals and perspectives in chapters below.



its long shadow across the then-known world and Paul made much use of its contributions: *pax Romana* (the peace of Rome), brought by Caesar Augustus (31 BC–AD 14) to a world torn by civil war and terrorized by pirates on the sea and robbers on the land; a pervasive and sturdy infrastructure; and a fair-minded jurisprudence system that transcended the petty politics of local towns. Indeed, the last-mentioned amenity ensured Paul an audience with the court of Rome, where the apostle was bound and determined to visit (Acts 25:10–28:31).

But Paul was born and raised a Jew. Though reared in the Gentile city of Tarsus, Paul was probably taken by his parents as a young person to Jerusalem to be trained to be a Pharisee, a rabbi (Acts 22:2–3). There he surpassed his peers in his grasp of the Torah and the oral tradition of the Pharisees, and in his love for the land of Israel. Indeed, Paul was so die-hard Jewish that he devoted himself to stamping out Judaism’s newest rival—Christianity. Paul’s zeal for Moses, his loathing for Gentiles, and his hatred of Jesus the crucified Messiah, drove him to the point of violence against the church. He relates his passion for Judaism and contempt for the church especially in Galatians 1:11–14; Philippians 3:4–6; and 1 Timothy 1:13; cf. Acts 9:1–2.

However, a “funny” thing happened to Paul the Pharisee on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians—he got saved through an encounter with the risen Christ (Gal. 1:15–16; Phil. 3:7–11; cf. Acts 9:3–18; 22: 2–21; 26:4–23). There Paul surrendered to the crucified Jesus who was none other than the glorious Lord and, in a divine touché, Paul the Gentile-basher was there and then called to be an apostle to the nations. In the flash of an instant, Paul exchanged the law of Moses for faith in Christ, hatred of non-Jews for love of the church, the land of Israel for the kingdom of God, and circumcision and the old covenant for the cross of Calvary. Paul’s encounter with the risen Jesus was nothing short of both a conversion and a calling.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, God’s setting apart of Paul to preach to the Gentiles the gospel of Jesus Christ was the beginning of the fulfillment of the end-time prophecy of the conversion of the nations predicted by Old Testament prophets like Isaiah, Micah, and others.<sup>3</sup>

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2 We will discuss in chapter one the issue of what one should call the nature of Paul’s Damascus experience.

3 See our discussion below also in chapter one.



With the preceding influences in mind—Greco-Roman, Judaism, and especially Christianity—we now turn to two major points in introducing Paul: (1) his letters, life and theology and (2) Paul’s ministry as involving a conflict in eschatologies.

## PAUL’S LETTERS, LIFE, AND THEOLOGY

In this section, we discuss Paul’s letters from both the traditional and non-traditional perspectives. Then we enter into a discussion of the importance of the book of Acts for understanding Paul’s life, noting the debate such a discussion has generated. Finally we survey the competing schools of thought that have claimed to be the center of Paul’s theology.

### *Paul’s Letters*

Thirteen letters are attributed to Paul in the New Testament, which have traditionally been grouped into four categories: Paul’s early epistles (Galatians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians); Paul’s major epistles (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians); his prison epistles (Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon); and the pastoral epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus).

The traditional approach to Paul’s letters, however, has for the last century or so been vociferously challenged by less conservatively inclined scholars. This group attributes only seven of the so-called Pauline letters to the apostle himself—Galatians, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, 1 Thessalonians, Philippians, and Philemon; the rest they think were written by Paul’s students after the apostle’s death in about AD 64. Therefore the latter “pseudonymous” writings are not to be given serious attention in crafting Paul’s theology. This left wing of Pauline scholarship bases its claim essentially on three arguments. First, the vocabulary of the disputable letters is different from that of the indisputable Pauline letters. Second, the history presumed by the pastoral epistles does not match the events of Paul’s letters nor the accounts of Paul’s travels as recorded in Acts. Third, the theology of the pseudonymous letters is at odds with the real Pauline epistles.

The traditional responses to the above argument are as follows: First, the differences in vocabulary between the disputable and indisputable letters of



Paul can rather easily be accounted for by realizing that Paul used different secretaries in his letters (Romans 16:22 names Tertius as one of them) and that the different circumstances of each church to which Paul wrote called for various vocabulary. Second, there is good reason for postulating the theory that Paul was released from his Roman captivity recorded in Acts 28 (somewhere around AD 62), after which he conducted a mission trip to Spain (see Romans 15) and perhaps elsewhere, but then in ca. AD 64 was rounded up with Peter and other Christians to be tried by Emperor Nero in Rome. There, reliable tradition tells us, Paul and Peter were martyred for their faith in Christ. Indeed, the fact that Luke, Paul's sometime missionary companion and author of Acts, does not record Paul's death in Acts 28 decidedly points toward the theory we have been advancing. Third, the overall theology of the indisputable letters of Paul—the overlapping of the two ages (see below)—is also the driving engine of the disputable Pauline letters, as more than one scholar has noted. And, if that is the case for the major theme of Paul's thought, then why should one doubt that it is the same or similar for Paul's minor themes?<sup>4</sup>

### *Paul's Life as Documented in Acts*

Because there is precious little autobiographical material in Paul's letters (mainly Gal. 1–2; Rom. 1; Phil. 3), one must turn to the book of Acts to compile a summary of the story of his life for therein Luke, Paul's missionary compatriot, records Paul's conversion, three missionary journeys, final trip to Jerusalem, and travel to Rome. In tracking Luke's association with Paul, three points need to be addressed: the biblical data, the liberal challenge, and the conservative response. The biblical picture of the relationship between Luke and Paul is straightforward: Luke was a fellow worker and companion of Paul (Philem. 24) who was dear to the apostle's heart (Col. 4:14). Moreover, if the "we" sections of Acts (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16) include Luke as a member of Paul's missionary team (as many think they do), then an intimate working relationship between the two is thereby confirmed.

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4 For documentation and a bibliography dealing with these three liberal arguments and the traditional counter-arguments, the reader is referred to the Introduction in my *The End of the Age Has Come: The Theology of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).



However, the traditional perspective has not gone uncriticized. During the twentieth century, liberal scholars attempted to drive a wedge between Luke (especially regarding the book of Acts) and Paul, arguing that the former is at odds with the latter. The classic expression of this approach is the article by Paul Vielhauer.<sup>5</sup> That author popularized four apparent differences, or contradictions, between Luke and Paul. First, comparing Acts 17:22–30 (Luke’s presentation of Paul’s speech at the Areopagus before the philosophers of Athens) with Romans 1:18–21 (Paul’s discussion of natural revelation), Vielhauer claimed that Luke’s positive portrayal of Paul’s attitude toward natural theology is opposed to Paul’s own negative attitude toward the same. Second, Luke provides a positive statement on Paul’s view of the law of Moses, whereas the apostle himself reaches the opposite conclusion in his letters. Third, Vielhauer maintained that Acts understands Paul’s Christology to be adoptionist in nature (Jesus became deity only at his resurrection) and void of a theology of the cross; teachings at variance with the true message of Paul. Fourth, the Lucan picture of Paul detracts from the centrality of eschatology which is characteristic of Paul’s thought. That is to say, the doctrine of the end times, which is such a constituent part of Paul’s epistles, finds no place in Acts.

In response to this challenge, evangelicals have demonstrated that the preceding inconsistencies are more imaginary than real. E. Earle Ellis’ critique is a good example of this line of argumentation. His reply counters Vielhauer point by point.<sup>6</sup> Concerning the first alleged difference, Ellis observes that Acts 17 does not teach that humankind possesses redemptive life by nature, apart from the gospel, something with which Paul would agree. Second, Luke and Paul are in substantial agreement that salvation does not come from keeping the Law (cf. Acts 15 and Gal. 1–2). Third, Acts 13:33, 37 (cf. 2:31, 36) do not teach that Jesus became the Son of God at the resurrection but, rather, that the resurrection proved that he already was the Son of God. This is fully in line with Romans 1:3–4. Moreover, Luke does indeed have a theology of the cross, as is evident in the mutual fate of Jesus and his followers (Luke 9:23; 22:35; Acts 7:60), including Paul (Acts 21:11; 23–34).

5 Paul Vielhauer, “On the ‘Paulinism’ of Acts” in *Studies in Luke-Acts*. Studies in Biblical Theology, ed. Leander E. Keck and J. Louis Martyn (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966), pp.33–50.

6 E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke*. New Century Bible (London: Nelson, 1974), pp.46–47.



Fourth, Ellis joins a chorus of scholars who cogently demonstrate that in the teachings of both Luke and Paul the kingdom of God is present spiritually now, and in the future will be a physical reality; that is, the already/not yet paradigm. Both writers are informed, therefore, by the same eschatological tension that exists between the first and second comings of Christ. In light of this discussion, it seems to us that Luke has indeed provided us with an accurate reading of Paul and, therefore, we very much need to include his data in our treatment of the apostle.

### *Paul's Theology*

Here we briefly survey four approaches to identifying a center in Paul's thought: justification by faith; the Tübingen school; the history of religions approach; and eschatology. The importance of this discussion proceeds from the valid assumption that if one can identify the key to the apostle's thought, then one has found therein a frame of reference for interpreting Paul's letters.

With the Protestant Reformation, justification by faith became the leading contender to be the center of Paul's theology (at least among non-Catholics), especially taking into consideration Galatians, Romans, and Philippians (chapter 3). The thesis of those letters is that the sinner is declared righteous before God through simple faith in Jesus Christ, not by the works of the Torah/ the law of Moses. Now, to be sure, justification by faith is a major player in Paul's theology, as we will see in his letters to the Galatians and Romans. But Pauline scholars of the last century observed that, as important as justification is to Paul, it nevertheless is not pervasive in the rest of Paul's writings. Rather, the doctrine of justification by faith seems to have been a teaching that Paul explained and defended vis-à-vis the Judaizers' influence on some, but not all, of the churches to which he wrote. In other words, Paul's apologetic for justification by faith was a polemic against the false teaching of the Judaizers that salvation is by faith in Christ plus obedience to the Torah. Justification by faith, according to these scholars, most probably is not, then, the overarching theme driving the Pauline corpus. But it should be observed that other scholars like Ernst Käsemann argued that justification by faith, wedded with eschatology (see below), is indeed the substructure of Paul's letters. We tend to agree with this counter claim.



The Tübingen theory is named after said German university and was associated with one of that institution's leading theologian-professors—F.C. Baur. In the mid to late nineteenth century, Baur claimed that the key to understanding Paul and, indeed, the entire New Testament, is to see that a theological civil war runs throughout its pages: Paul's message of justification by faith versus Peter's message of justification by faith plus the works of the Torah (so too the Judaizers). It was left to the anonymous work of Acts in the second century to paint an idyllic portrait of the early church, in which Paul and Peter come across as being the best of buddies.<sup>7</sup> Although the Tübingen perspective enjoyed enormous popularity among New Testament interpreters on the Continent during the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth century, its influence all but vanished in the second half of the twentieth century thanks to two developments. First, scholars recognized Baur's theory for what it really was—the foisting upon the New Testament the dialectic philosophy of Hegel: thesis (Paul's message) versus anti-thesis (Peter's message) resulting in a synthesis (Acts' reconciliation of the two). In other words, the theology of Paul, and the New Testament, was distorted by imposing philosophical categories on it. Second, no reputable theologian today doubts that Luke wrote Acts and that he did so in the late first century not the middle to late second century.

In the first half of the twentieth century another hypothesis arose concerning the center of Paul's theology—the history of religions school. Although there were various constructs under the umbrella of this approach, they shared the commonality that Paul gave up his Jewish faith for Hellenistic (Greek) religion, whether that was the Greek mystery religions (so Richard Reitzenstein), Hellenistic mysticism (so Adolf Deissmann), or Platonic Gnosticism (so Rudolph Bultmann).<sup>8</sup> The history of religions approach is still championed today

7 The key works of Baur are *Paul, the Apostle of Jesus Christ: His Life and Work, His Epistles and His Doctrine* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1873) and *The Church History of the First Three Centuries*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1878–79).

8 The reader can pursue these theories in the Introduction to my *The End of the Age Has Come*. The Greek mystery religions were secret religious cults that claimed that rites like baptism and sacred meals unified the worshipper with Isis, Cybele, or other Greek deities. Hellenistic mysticism, whereby the worshipper was thought to be deified, was a more general phenomenon that pervaded Greco-Roman spirituality. Gnosticism was a second to third century aberration of Christianity that, in good Platonic fashion, disparaged the body but extolled the soul. One can see Plato's anthropological dualism in this—matter is



by a few high profile radical scholars (for example, the Jesus Seminar, Elaine Pagels, Bart Ehrman), but most Pauline scholars today rather argue that Paul was true to his Jewish heritage and that therefore Hellenistic influence was at the periphery, not the center, of his theology. This is so even after duly noting the interpenetration of Hellenism and Judaism in the first century.<sup>9</sup> We will see in this work that Hellenistic religion made its most significant impact on some of Paul's churches and opponents.

The fourth contender for the center of Paul's thought is Jewish eschatology, but in revised form. Albert Schweitzer in the early twentieth century convinced most New Testament scholars that the two-age structure of the writings of Second Temple Judaism (the time between the rebuilding of the second temple in Jerusalem in 519 BC until its destruction by the Romans in AD 70) was the key to, not only Jesus' message, but also Paul's theology. Apocalyptic Judaism was a dominant strand of Jewish theology by the time of Jesus, teaching that history divides into two ages: this age of sin and sorrow because of Adam's fall and the age to come/kingdom of God, a period of unprecedented righteousness and peace; and it would be the Messiah who would establish the latter.<sup>10</sup> Most Pauline scholars today believe this is the key to the thought of Jesus, Paul, and indeed the whole of the New Testament.<sup>11</sup> And with this we agree. But there is a significant difference between the ancient Jewish two-age scenario and the New Testament, namely, whereas the former expected that the two ages would be consecutive (when the Messiah comes he will completely replace this age with the age to come), the latter claims that the two ages are simultaneous; that is, they overlap. Thus, with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ the age to come/kingdom of God broke into this present age but without ending it. This is often labeled "inaugurated eschatology"—with the first coming of Christ

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evil and spirit/soul alone is good. An incipient form of Gnosticism—Docetism (Christ was divine but only appeared to be human)—is refuted by the epistles of John. It would fall to early Church Fathers like Irenaeus and Tertullian in the second century to refute the full-blown Gnosticism that threatened the church of their day.

9 The classic work on the subject is by Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974).

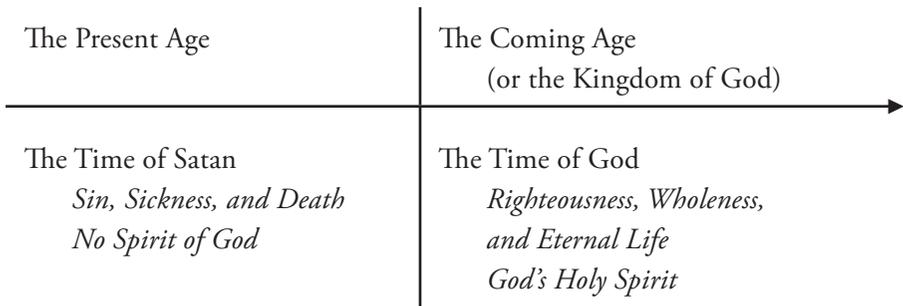
10 For thorough documentation of this point, see again my work, *The End of the Age Has Come* and the works cited there.

11 The classic defense of this approach is the work by George Ladd and updated by Donald A. Hagner, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1993).



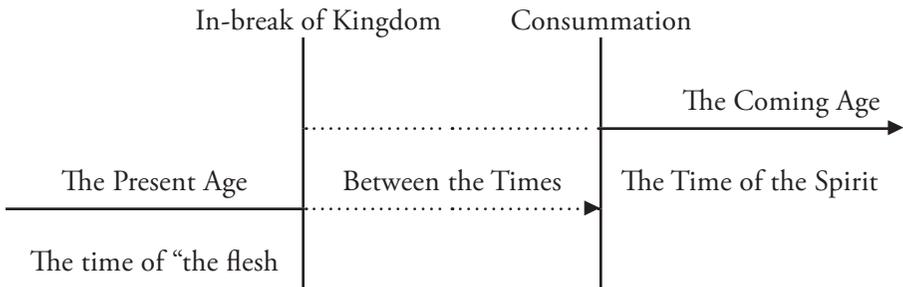
the age to come *already* dawned but it is *not yet* complete, awaiting the second coming of Christ for that. Most Pauline scholars take this fourth view to be the key to understanding Paul’s theology. The following charts by Gordon Fee nicely expresses this view,<sup>12</sup> first from the Jewish perspective and then from the Christian adaptation of that perspective:

**OLD JEWISH VIEW:**



**THE CHRISTIAN VIEW:**

THE END



But we need to nuance the preceding point by noting three eschatological constructs that have been applied to the message of Jesus and by way of application to Paul’s apocalypticism: consistent eschatology, inaugurated eschatology, and realized eschatology. “Consistent eschatology” is a label applied by New Testament scholars to the works of Albert Schweitzer, a late nineteenth-century biblical scholar. “Consistent”

<sup>12</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), p.50.



means futurist, with reference to how Schweitzer interpreted the message of Jesus. As we saw above, Judaism at the time of Christ divided history into two periods: this age of sin, when sin rules; and the age to come, when the Messiah is expected to bring the kingdom of God to earth. Schweitzer concluded that an apocalyptic understanding of the kingdom was not only foundational for Christ's teaching, but also to understanding his life. Thus Schweitzer maintained that Jesus believed it was his vocation to become the coming Son of Man. Initially Jesus revealed this messianic secret only to Peter, James, and John. Later, Peter told it to the rest of the twelve. Judas told the secret to the High Priest who used it as the ground for Jesus' execution (Mark 14:61–64; cf. Dan. 7:13).

According to Schweitzer's interpretation, when Jesus sent out the twelve on a mission to proclaim the coming kingdom of God, he did not expect them to return. The Twelve were the "violent people" (Matt. 11:12) who would provoke the messianic tribulation that would herald the kingdom. Whereas some earlier Jewish theologians believed that one could only wait passively for the kingdom, Schweitzer believed that the mission of Jesus was designed to provoke its coming. When this did not happen, Jesus determined to give his own life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45) and so cause the kingdom to come.

According to Schweitzer, Jesus took matters into his own hands by precipitating his death, hoping that would be the catalyst for causing God to make the wheel of history turn to its climax—the arrival of the kingdom of God. But, said Schweitzer, Jesus was wrong again, and he died in despair. So, for Schweitzer, Jesus never witnessed the dawning of the age to come; it lay in the distant future, separated from this present age.

Evangelical New Testament scholars today generally reject most of Schweitzer's conclusions regarding his "consistent eschatology," especially his disregard for the reliability of the Gospels. On the positive side, he did call attention to the fact that the message of Jesus is rooted in the concept of the kingdom of God, a connection that is still foundational to a proper understanding of biblical prophecy and the Gospels today, even though most current New Testament scholars today interpret that connection quite differently than Schweitzer did.

"Realized Eschatology," in contrast to futurist eschatology where the kingdom of God awaits a final consummation at the end of history, views the kingdom of God as already realized in the person and mission of Jesus. The



futurist aspects of Jesus' teaching are reduced to a minimum and his apocalyptic language is viewed as symbolic of theological truths.

The person most responsible for advocating this position was the British scholar C. H. Dodd. In his 1935 book *Parables of the Kingdom*, Dodd focused on Jesus' teachings that announced the arrival of the kingdom with his coming. For instance, in Luke 11:20 Jesus says, "But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you" (cf. Luke 17:21; Matthew 13). Eschatology becomes a matter of the present experience rather than any kind of future event. The kingdom has fully come in the messianic ministry of Jesus.

Most interpreters have criticized Dodd's realized eschatology for ignoring Jesus' teachings that point to a future consummation of the kingdom (e.g., Mark 13; Matthew 24–25). When all of Jesus' teachings are considered, futurist eschatology balances realized eschatology. To be sure, the kingdom arrived with Jesus, but Jesus himself taught that history still awaits a final completion. The kingdom of God is both "already" and "not yet"; which leads us to the third view of the relationship of the kingdom of God to the ministry of Jesus Christ.

"Inaugurated Eschatology" is a concept commonly connected with the twentieth-century Swiss theologian Oscar Cullmann. Like others before him, Cullmann understood that the Jewish notion of the two ages formed an important background for understanding the message of Jesus. According to Judaism, history is divided into two periods: this age of sin and the age to come (i.e. the kingdom of God). For Jews, the advent of the Messiah would affect the shift from the former to the latter. In other words, Judaism viewed the two ages as consecutive. According to Cullmann, Jesus Christ announced that the end of time, the kingdom of God, had arrived *in* history (see Mark 1:15 and parallels; especially Luke 4:43; 6:20; 7:28; 8:1, 10; 9:2, 11, 27, 60, 62; 10:9, 11; 11:20; 13:18, 20; 16:16; 17:20–21; 18:16, 17, 24–25, 29; Acts 28:31). Yet other passages suggest that, although the age to come had *already* dawned, it *was not* yet complete. It awaited the Second Coming for its full realization (Luke 13:28, 29; 14:15; 19:11; 21:31; 22:16, 18; 23:51; Acts 1:6), hence the name "inaugurated" eschatology. Such a view is pervasive in the New Testament besides the Gospels (see, for example: Acts 2:17–21; 3:18, 24; 1 Cor. 15:24; 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:2; 1 John 2:18). So, for inaugurated eschatology, the two ages are simultaneous: the age to come exists in the midst of this present age. Christians



therefore live in between the two ages until the parousia (second coming of Christ). We have argued elsewhere that inaugurated eschatology best describes Paul's apocalypticism.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, we will see in the body of this study that the above three labels—consistent eschatology, inaugurated eschatology, and realized eschatology—are at work concerning Paul's opponents, as reflected in his letters and in his missionary endeavors as recorded in Acts.

## PAUL'S MINISTRY AS CONFLICT IN ESCHATOLOGIES

The book of Acts reinforces the impression one gets from Paul's letters that his ministry was one governed by opposition. Such opposition cannot be explained solely by Paul's forceful personality or his Jewish heritage. Rather, Paul's vigorous debates with and regarding the churches he served centered on the exclusivity of the gospel of Christ that he preached, the non-negotiable apocalypse of Jesus the Messiah. Our work will seek to document this claim. For now, we set the table for that discussion by calling attention to at least six types of eschatology that were current in the first century AD relative to Paul's opposition (including Paul's own teaching of inaugurated eschatology). Those six religious perspectives were: (1) non-*merkabah* (chariot-throne, with reference to the worshipper being caught up to heaven to view the chariot-throne of God; see more on this below) non-Christian Judaism (consistent eschatology), (2) Paul's inaugurated eschatology, (3) non-*merkabah* Judaizers (inaugurated eschatology), (4) the Roman imperial cult, (5) Hellenistic/syncretistic religion, and (6) *merkabah* Judaizers—who we will call “merkabizers” (realized eschatology).

Helmut Koester has identified five components of realized eschatology in the Roman imperial cult.<sup>14</sup> We agree with his five components model and would suggest that the same five components also pertained to all of the above eschatologies in their respective ways except non-*merkabah*, non-Christian Judaism (which espoused consistent eschatology).<sup>15</sup> We now offer the following

13 See the author's *The End of the Age Has Come*.

14 Helmut Koester, “Jesus the Victim,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111/1 (1992) pp. 3–15.

15 We will distinguish more explicitly these models of eschatology in the respective chapters to follow. We might mention here that we know from non-Christian Jewish mystic



taxonomy of eschatology regarding the preceding religious perspectives, after which we offer a brief summary of each:

<b>Five Components of Eschatology</b>	<b>Hellenistic Religion</b> (realized eschatology)	<b>Roman Imperial Cult</b> (realized eschatology)	<b>Merkabah Judaizers</b> (realized eschatology)	<b>Paul</b> (inaugurated eschatology)	<b>Non-Merkabah Judaizers</b> (inaugurated eschatology)
1) The New Age has dawned	The New Age/Heaven is entered into now through mystical union with the deity	The primordial age is the New Age dawned	The mystic is caught up to heaven in Christ where he/she experiences the age to come in heaven, even before it comes to earth in the form of the kingdom of God	The Age to come/ kingdom of Christ and God has dawned and it is received by faith apart from the law of Moses	The Age to come/ kingdom of Christ and God has dawned and with it the power to obey the law of Moses
2) It is cosmic and universal	This mystical union transcends earth by joining the initiate with heaven and the cosmos	It includes the earth and heaven and is universal	The age to come is both cosmic and historical. It is the future age to come (historical) dawning in heaven before it arrives on earth (cosmic)	New Creation	New Creation

texts that merkabah mysticism abounded in Second Temple Judaism, and apparently came into contact with Paul's churches, or at least a Christian variety of it. We do not include non-Christian Judaism in the chart due to its consistent exchatology stance. But we will incorporate this model in chapter 12.



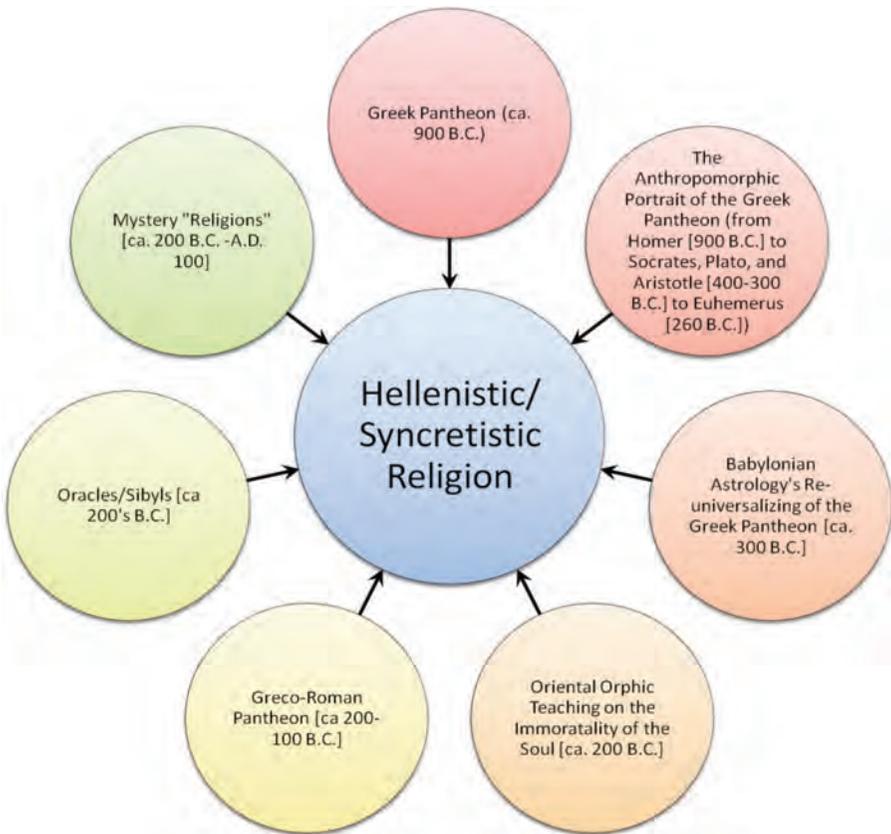
<b>Five Components of Eschatology</b>	<b>Hellenistic Religion</b>  (realized eschatology)	<b>Roman Imperial Cult</b>  (realized eschatology)	<b>Merkabah Judaizers</b>  (realized eschatology)	<b>Paul</b>  (inaugurated eschatology)	<b>Non-Merkabah Judaizers</b>  (inaugurated eschatology)
3) A Savior inaugurates the New Age	Union with the Deity (Greco-Roman pantheon, Osiris, etc.)	Caesar Augustus	Christ is the heavenly, preexistent Son of Man, the Savior of Israel and of the Jewish mystic	Jesus the Messiah	Jesus the Messiah
4) The New Age/Savior is predicted in sacred writings	Fate and astrology/ and oracles/ sibyls	Priene Inscription and Virgil's <i>Eclogues</i> , etc.	Ezekiel 1 and Daniel 7, along with Old Testament prophecies about the coming of the Messiah, essentially equate the Son of Man with the Messiah. These texts (Ezek. 1 and Dan. 7) are interpreted in <i>Merkabah</i> Mysticism as prescribing how the believer can be caught up to heaven to experience Christ, the Son of Man/Messiah	OT Messianic prophecies	OT Messianic prophecies
5) The New Age is celebrated through rituals	Sacred meals and rituals celebrate the dawning of the New Age	The Birthday of Caesar and the Caesarean games	Fasting, acts of asceticism, and devotion to the law of Moses are the prerequisite rituals/celebrations for being caught up to the heavenly throne	Baptism and the Lord's Supper	Jewish feasts and Christian baptism and the Lord's Supper



*Hellenistic/Syncretistic Religion*

Here we follow the remarks of Helmut Koester in his description of the Hellenistic Religion, a syncretistic amalgamation of religious perspectives that coalesced between 300 and ca. 63 BC (from the Hellenization of the world begun by Alexander the Great to Rome’s takeover of the world).<sup>16</sup> We suggest the following diagram to account for the various streams of tradition contributing to the mosaic of Hellenistic Religion:

HELLENISTIC/SYNCRETISTIC RELIGION [CA. 300 BC-AD200]



<sup>16</sup> Helmut Koester, *History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), pp. 141–204.



The upshot of our diagram is that the Greek pantheon of deities underwent an ebb and flow of development that eventually transformed it into Hellenistic syncretistic religion. Thus the original Greek pantheon attracted to it elements of other religions—Babylonian astrology, oriental Orphic teaching, the Roman pantheon of deities, Greek oracles and sibyls, and the mystery religions.

For our purposes, the five components of eschatology (in this case, realized) noted above can be identified in the Hellenistic Religion:

(1) The New Age, or heaven, can be experienced now through mystical union with the deity (whether the Greco-Roman pantheon of deities; Isis, wife/sister of Osiris; Demeter in Eleusis, or others in the mystery religions). Indeed, Plato’s doctrine of illumination (whereby reason perceives the world of the ideas) prepared the way for such mystical union with the deity.

(2) Mystical union with the deity transcends earth by joining the soul of the initiate with heaven and the cosmic (astrological) bodies.

(3) The Savior who brings the New Age/heaven is the particular deity with whom the devotee is united.

(4) Fate has determined the destiny of the initiate. Closer to Roman times, the oracles contained sacred predictions regarding those who sought them while the Sibyls recorded the defeat of anti-god forces and the exaltation of the faithful.

(5) Religious rituals such as baptism and sacred meals both united the devotee with the deity as well as celebrated their encounter. The preceding five components are seen in Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses XI*, an Isis Aretalogy, a story told to exalt a deity, in this case Isis the Egyptian female deity. Book XI highlights the preceding five components, which I place here in chart form. The chart summarizes the content of Book XI:

<p><b>Five Components of Realized Eschatology:</b></p>	<p><b>Realized Eschatology of <i>Metamorphoses</i> Book XI</b></p>
<p>1) New Age dawned</p>	<p>Isis—mother of universe—is the first offspring of the ages (XI. 5) who brings salvation (XI. 12) /rebirth in Isis (XI. 25)</p>



Five Components of Realized Eschatology:	Realized Eschatology of Metamorphoses Book XI
2) Cosmic/universal renewal	Through the mystery rites—the initiate joins the gods (XI. 21), is glorious (XI. 10) like the stars (XI. 10), and receives unutterable secrets (XI. 23)
3) Savior	Isis, the savior (XI. 25) who embodies all gods (XI. 5–6) and rules with Osiris (XI. 30)
4) Predicted through the sacred texts	Isis priests give divine promises/dreams/oracles to her followers (XI. 13)
5) New Age celebrated through rituals	Initiates join a processional that makes an offering to Isis (XI. 16), abstains from eating meat for 10 days (XI. 22, 28), participates in a ritual bath (XI. 23), etc.

### *The Roman Imperial Eschatology*

Koester has identified five components of the Roman imperial cult beginning with Caesar Augustus that project the belief that the New Age has been realized (the same five we mentioned above).<sup>17</sup> (1) The primordial age, the New Age is here, (2) which encompasses earth and heaven. (3) This New Age has come because of Caesar Augustus. (4) Augustus' birth marked the beginning of a new day, and his *Pax Romana* has brought that New Age. (4) All of this is foretold by the poets. (5) Augustus' birthday and the Caesarean games celebrate this realized eschatology.

These five components can be found, for example, in Virgil's *Fourth Eclogue* and in the Priene Inscription.

### *Merkabah Judaizers*

*Merkabah* (throne) mysticism was pervasive in Jewish apocalyptic circles in Second Temple Judaism and even beyond 134–135 AD, the second revolt

<sup>17</sup> Helmut Koester, "Jesus the Victim," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111/1 (1992) pp. 3–15.



of the Jews against Rome. *Merkabah* mysticism was based on Ezekiel 1 and Daniel 7 and the descriptions there of the faithful being caught up to heaven to see the throne of God and to commune with the preexistent Son of Man. Enoch's throne vision in *1 Enoch 14* seems to represent the oldest example of *merkabah* mysticism. Four comments about this type of mystic experience need to be made at this juncture. (1) The major texts fitting into this category are: *1 Enoch 14:2*; John; 2 Corinthians 12:1–7; Colossians 2; Revelation; 3 *Enoch*; *Hagigah* 11b–16a; *Hekalot Rabbati*; etc. (2) The components of *merkabah* include: (a) rigorous preparation for the heavenly ascent via prayer and fasting; (b) mystic ascent through the seven “houses” or palaces of heaven; (c) negotiations with the angels assigned to each of the palaces by the use of magical formulae, seals, etc.; (d) danger accompanying the ascent; (e) vision of the glorious, divine throne chariot (*merkabah*). (3) Based on Ezekiel 1:15–21 (cf. other biblical throne visions in Ex. 24:10–11; 1 Kings 22:19; Isa. 6; Ezek. 3:22–24; 8:1–18; 10:9–17; 43:1–4; Dan. 7:9–14), one of the purposes of *merkabah* mysticism seems to have been to legitimate sectarian teaching, as is evidenced by Rabbinic attempts to monitor it (*Exod. Rab.* 43:8; m. Hag. 2:1; b. Hag. 14a; 15a; *Hek. Rab.* 20:1; b. Sanh 38b). (4) It may be that prior to 70 AD *merkabah* mysticism and Jewish apocalypticism were intermingled traditions, which would account for similarities between the two, but with the dashed hopes of Jewish apocalypticism due to the events between 70–135 AD, *merkabah* emerged as an independent movement. As we will document in the respective chapters to follow, one wing of the Judaizing movement embraced *merkabah* mysticism. These folk were professing Christians but whose Jewish roots influenced them to continue to keep the law of Moses. Paul dealt with this aberration of grace in 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, and Colossians.

The five components of (realized) eschatology delineated above can be rather easily identified in the Judaizing *merkabah* mysticism: (1) The age to come is experienced now when the mystic is caught up to heaven. There the believer views the throne of God, communes with Jesus Christ the heavenly, preexistent Son of Man, and is given a vision of the age to come as it has dawned in heaven. (2) Such a vision encompasses both the cosmos and history. (3) The Savior is God but also Christ, the preexistent heavenly Son of Man with whom the mystic communes. Jesus, the Son of Man will soon come to



earth to establish the kingdom of God in Israel. (4) Ezekiel 1 and Daniel 7 are viewed as the prophetic texts that invite the believer to mystically experience the throne of God and the Son of Man. These texts predict the coming of the Son of Man to earth, and the mystic's communion with him is a proleptic experience of that event. Jesus, Son of Man is identified with Israel's long-awaited Messiah, predicted in the Old Testament. (5) Fasting, acts of asceticism, and devotion to the law of Moses were the prerequisite rituals that needed to be observed in order for the believer to qualify to be "caught up to heaven."

### *Paul and the Apocalypse of Christ*

We earlier identified inaugurated eschatology to be an important, if not the central, influence on the apostle Paul. That is to say, Paul believed (1) the age to come has dawned on earth (1 Cor. 10:11), which (2) is nothing less than a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). (3) This is so because Jesus is the Messiah/Christ whose life, death, and resurrection inaugurated the kingdom of God. (4) Jesus is Israel's long-awaited Messiah foretold in the Old Testament. (5) Baptism and the Lord's Supper celebrate entrance into and continuation in the age to come, respectively.

### *Non-Merkabah Judaizers*

This second wing of Judaizing Christians in the early church was not of the *merkabah* variety. This group tracked with Paul's inaugurated eschatology except these Judaizers maintained that salvation was based on faith in Jesus Christ plus obedience to the law of Moses. In their view, the eschatological presence of the Holy Spirit empowers the Christian to obey the Mosaic code: circumcision, dietary laws, Old Testament feasts, and all. But Paul begs to differ with this perspective in Galatians and Romans.

Our thesis for this work flows from the preceding discussion: the conflicts Paul encountered in the cities of the churches he founded and wrote to erupted as he presented his apocalypse of Christ in the face of the various eschatologies delineated above: Hellenistic religion, Roman imperial cult, Judaizing *merkabah* mysticism, Judaizing non-*merkabah* mysticism, and also non-Christian Judaism.



## DEVELOPMENT OF BOOK

Here's how the thesis is developed. Chapter 1 presents the view that Paul's conversion and call were eschatologically driven. This is based on Galatians 1, Romans 1, and Acts. More particularly, the four components comprising Paul's message were eschatological in nature and were rooted in his conversion/call: Jesus is the Messiah; his death and resurrection inaugurated the age to come; this salvation is entered into by faith not by obedience to the law of Moses; and Paul's target audience was Gentiles. Moreover, these four eschatological components of Paul's message would become flash points with the other eschatological constructs highlighted above.

Galatians is perhaps Paul's earliest letter and it sounds a theme dear to his heart: sinners are justified by faith in Christ apart from the law of Moses (Chapter 2). According to the apostle to the Gentiles, being justified by faith in Christ is God's present end-time acquittal of the believer. Indeed, justification before God is a blessing that Judaism relegated to the age to come but which Paul contends is granted in this age to Jews and Gentiles alike. According to Paul, the law of Moses has served its divinely intended purpose and has now run its course in this age. Paul develops this thesis vis-à-vis the non-*merkabah* Judaizers. This reading of Galatians is reinforced by Acts 13:13–15:35, which highlights the showdown between Paul's messianic eschatology and that of the Jewish synagogue. Also to be factored into this discussion is the role the imperial cult played in the crisis in Galatia.

The third chapter sees 1 Thessalonians as patently eschatological in perspective. It equates the sufferings of Jesus, Paul, and the Thessalonians with the messianic woes/great tribulation—those signs of the times that Judaism expected to occur right before the arrival of the Messiah. These afflictions Paul and Christians will continue to experience until the parousia.

Second Thessalonians picks up where 1 Thessalonians leaves off in its discussion of the signs of the end times, except that 2 Thessalonians focuses more on the not-yet aspect of the kingdom of God. This is so because some in the church at Thessalonica, influenced by the Hellenistic syncretistic religion, assumed that the age to come had fully arrived. To counteract such realized eschatology, Paul discusses a number of signs of the end times that were still in progress: the need to endure the messianic woes; the imminent appearance of



the man of lawlessness; eschatological apostasy; the removal of the restrainer. In other words, the return of Christ had not yet occurred. This was no time for the Thessalonians, therefore, to stop working for a living and much less time to stop living a life of faithfulness to the Lord. Acts 17:1–15 adds to this picture by pitting Paul against not only Jewish teaching on the Messiah, but also against the Roman imperial cult. And adding fuel to the fire of opposition to Paul were the non-Christian Jews in Thessalonica.

Paul fought Christian opponents on two fronts in the Corinthian letters (Chapter 4). First, the Corinthian church mistakenly believed that by virtue of the possession of the Spirit it had fully entered into the kingdom of God. This belief was no doubt encouraged by the Hellenistic religion that dominated the city of Corinth as well as the teaching of the merkabizers—Jewish Christian mystics. First Corinthians is therefore Paul's correction of such realized eschatology by reminding the believers in Corinth that this age had not yet been replaced by the age to come. Thus: The wisdom of the Spirit (of the age to come) is available only in the cross of Christ (the sufferings of the messianic woes that culminate this age); the resurrection of the body (of the age to come) has not yet happened for the Christian and therefore the believer must resist the temptation to commit immorality (associated with this age); neither has mystical union with Christ through baptism and the Lord's Supper (sacraments that bespeak the presence of the age to come) delivered the Christian from this age and the need to demonstrate personal faith and obedience to God; spiritual gifts (especially tongues, interpretation of tongues and miracles) are not an indication that Christians have become like angels; and, the general resurrection has not yet occurred. Moreover, Acts 17:16–34 contributes to the portrait of Paul's opposition in 1 Corinthians in terms of the teaching of the Athenian philosophers.

By the time of the writing of 2 Corinthians things had taken a turn for the worse in the Corinthian church, for Paul's opposition there had further stirred up trouble between Paul and the Corinthian believers. Paul's apostolic affliction became the target of attack by these intruders, who looked down upon him compared to their divine wonder-workings born out of mystic experience. Paul responded to such criticism by emphasizing, in 2 Corinthians, that Paul and the believer live in the tension between the two ages. Acts 18:1–28 contributes to that discussion by highlighting non-Christian Jewish opposition to Paul's ministry in



Corinth, as does also the presence of the imperial cult. Chapter 5 summarizes 1 and 2 Corinthians in light of the background material uncovered in Chapter 4.

Like Galatians, Romans presents the Christian's justification as God's end-time acquittal in this present age (Chapter 6). The key verses of Romans—1:16–17—make this clear: faith in Jesus Christ brings with it the good news that sinners are now declared righteous before God. Such a theme is apocalyptic in orientation in that the righteousness associated in Second Temple Judaism with the age to come is already a reality in this present age for believers in Christ. But to make this point, Paul first has to show that the law of Moses was intended by God to reveal the fact that no human can merit God's favor because in fact no human can keep the Mosaic code. This truth drives the sinner—Jew and Gentile alike—to faith in Christ alone for justification. This message is one the non-*merkabah* Judaizers needed to hear. Moreover, Israel though not comprehending this spiritual axiom at the present time, will according to Paul embrace Jesus as its Messiah at the end of history. Finally, Romans makes the point that the righteousness of the age to come transforms the behavior of the Christian and the church in this evil age. Furthermore, Romans subtly undermines Roman imperial eschatology. Acts 28 also factors into this discussion, revealing how entrenched non-Christian Jews became toward Paul's apocalypse of Christ.

In Philippians 2:12–13 Paul exhorts the Christians at Philippi to work out their salvation (Chapter 7). For the apostle, such a challenge is rooted in the overlapping of the two ages, namely, believers are to demonstrate the lifestyle of Christ in this present age which will complete their entrance into the age to come. So, like Christ, Christians should particularly demonstrate a willingness to suffer the messianic woes like Christ did (but which the *merkabah* Judaizers discredited) and to treat others with the same selflessness that Christ showed while he was on earth, all the while rejoicing in the Lord. Moreover, both Philippians and Acts 16:11–40 provide a countercultural message to the Roman imperial eschatology.

In Second Temple Judaism, mysticism and apocalypticism were related, especially in the form of *merkabah* mysticism (Chapter 8). *Merkabah* mysticism taught that Jews could be caught up to heaven to gaze upon the throne of God if they obeyed the law of Moses, fasted, and performed ascetic practices. There in heaven the mystic saw the reality of the age to come before it actually



appeared on earth. In Colossians, Paul counters such *merkabah* mysticism of the Judaizing variety by asserting that Christians are caught up to the throne of God by worshipping Christ, the fullness of the Godhead; not by obeying the law of Moses. In fact, the law of Moses is a part of this age, not the age to come. There in heaven Christians presently reign with Christ and experience the unfolding of the age to come/kingdom of God. But such spiritual, mystical union with Christ on the throne of God must result in a righteous lifestyle lived on earth. This is the true wisdom of God. As we will also see, Hellenistic religion in the Lycus Valley also fed into the Colossian heresy that Paul refutes in his letter to the Colossian church. Beside all of that, Paul also had to contend with the imperial cult in the city of Colossae.

Although there is no explicit mention of apocalyptic ideas in Philemon, the letter is informed by an implicit eschatological principle—namely, in Christ there is a reversal of earthly status (Chapter 9). Thus it is that Paul can presume upon Philemon to set his slave Onesimus free because the dawning of the age to come has relativized race, gender, and status. That is to say, in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female, slave nor free (Gal. 3:28).

While some scholars contend that Ephesians has capitulated to realized eschatology and a triumphalist view of the church, the truth is that Ephesians is a spiritual call to Christians to their battle stations—in heaven (Chapter 10). In other words, Christians are in Christ and have therefore been raised to the heavens with him, and there they encounter both blessing and battle. The blessings in heaven include forgiveness, the indwelling of the Spirit, reigning with Christ, the new temple of God that is composed of Jew and Gentile, etc. These blessings in Christ bespeak the fact that the Christian and the church participate in the age to come that dawned in heaven with Christ's death and resurrection. But heaven is also the scene for the end-time holy war against Satan (cf. 1:3–14 with 6:10–20; etc.). It is there that the church is engaged in a death struggle against the enemies of God. This reality bespeaks the fact that the age to come is not yet complete, not even in heaven. But the battle is the Lord's and ultimately the church will win. This message is designed to strengthen the faith of the Ephesian believers in the face of Hellenistic religion and the Roman imperial cult (cf. Acts 19:1–41). Paul's message to the Ephesians also served to sever wisdom from the law of Moses—a notion sure to anger some Jews.



Those who reject Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles do so largely because they believe those letters abandon Paul's eschatological hope of a parousia in favor of a realized eschatology associated with the first coming of Christ and that consequently the Pastorals acquiesce to the standard ethic of the Greco-Roman world (Chapter 11). But it is more accurate to say that the epiphany scheme in the Pastorals conveys the time period between the first and second coming of Christ. Thus the Pastorals are deeply imprinted by inaugurated eschatology and it is that which shapes the author's ethic—a clarion call to endure the messianic woes in the face of a world hostile to the gospel. This is hardly a “bourgeois Christianity” designed to accommodate the ancient Greco-Roman world. Acts 19—once again—throws light on the Ephesian setting, this time regarding the Pastorals, where Hellenistic religion and Roman imperial eschatology coexisted. It may be also that Paul's Jewish opponents, as reflected in the Pastoral Letters, drank deeply from the well of Philonic thought, as we will see.

This concluding chapter takes a step back by overviewing Paul's theology as a whole by using the seven typical systematic categories as a grid through which to interpret Paul's writings. We state in advance the main idea that emerges from our investigation, leaving the chapter as a whole to fill out the details:

### *I. Paul's Theology Proper*

Paul viewed God through an apocalyptic lens: this age is evil and in these last days it is getting worse; the signs of the times are upon Christians and Christ will return at any moment; as a matter of fact, the only hope the church has is the parousia.

### *II. Paul's Christology*

Concerning Paul's Christology, he believed that Jesus' death and resurrection inaugurated the age to come; Jesus' death and resurrection is being re-presented through him; and those who believe his message are united to Christ's death and resurrection. Consequently, the Christian lives in the intersection of the two ages—deliverance now but not yet.



### *III. Paul's Pneumatology*

Paul's pneumatology is straightforward: the presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer and in the church is a key sign that the age to come has dawned; and the Spirit is received by faith in Christ alone, not by the works of the Torah. In point of fact, the Law stirs up the flesh. Only the Spirit can subdue the old nature with the obedience of the heart that comes from participating in the new covenant.

### *IV. Paul's Anthropology*

The two Adams represent the two ages: The first Adam is the head of this age and the old humanity; while Christ, the last Adam, is the head of the age to come and the new humanity.

### *V. Paul's Soteriology*

Paul's soteriology unfolds in three tenses, which is governed by the overlapping of the two ages. The Christian was justified before God at the moment of faith in Christ and now participates in the age to come. But the believer continues to live in this present age, which calls for daily sanctification. When Christ returns the believer will experience the full scope of salvation on resurrection day.

### *VI. Paul's Ecclesiology*

Paul's ecclesiology is simple—the church is the eschatological people of God in Christ. Yet, no one metaphor is sufficient to capture the full-orbed picture of the church, for it ranges from the body of Christ to the bride of Christ to the restored Israel. Still, the multiple images of the church are rooted in eschatology.

### *VII. Paul's Eschatology*

Paul's eschatology attests to the overlapping of the two ages in that the signs of the end times began with the first coming of Christ, but that they will not be completed until his return.



*Conclusion to Paul's Theology*

The conclusion of this work explores the spiritual and political reasons why Paul's opponents rejected his apocalyptic gospel. Moreover, the already/not-yet aspects of the age to come hold the key for properly relating Paul's apocalyptic gospel to today.